

My Death Wish

Every day since the end of August, I've been running as fast as my legs could carry me, far away from school and into the quiet forest roads many miles away. Since August, even high school has hardly seemed a challenge. Today, for my incredible effort, I've given myself a death wish- a day of torture for my body and perhaps the ruin of my reputation among my siblings and peers.

A race official announces that the boys high school cross country race begins in two minutes. No longer was my team practicing for our races. Today, the results of our weeks of training will be revealed in my first race. I unwillingly head down to the starting line with hundreds of competitors. The five-kilometer high school cross country race at New Fairfield is my death wish

This race will matter to me. It's my first competition of my first sport of my first year in high school, and my performance this race may not only be used as a baseline reference to Coach, but also an opportunity to be judged negatively by my teammates, family, and friends.

But I'm not ready. My legs are cold. There's some soreness in my foot from a tiring workout some days ago. I didn't drink nearly enough water yesterday. And worst of all, I am wearing my uniform's uber-short shorts in front of hundreds of strangers. I'm also not well trained. I'm set up for a terrible day- the day I signed up for cross country I set myself up for a day like this.

For the last month, since the first day of school, cross country has been the most physically grueling experience of my life. Our running practices have taught us the skill of running and the sense of peer pressure that whispers in you, "Keep running until your legs feel 'dead,' and then run some more!" Being a freshman on the team with the fastest sophomores in decades has been a shameful experience, so much so that I complained for hours on end after the first day of school to my parents to allow my resignation from the team if my legs didn't stop hurting by the end of the week. They denied my request.

That recent feeling was nothing compared to my current mental state-of-being. On the starting line, I imagine horrible scenes of my own demise: falling behind and returning home with a last place medal; and even dying, which seemed not too unlikely in a human stampede. I

also imagine myself miraculously full of energy, sprinting the whole way without being tired. Although common sense reminds me that either extreme was very unlikely I nonetheless actually become a little depressed, seconds before the gun sounds. The “Good Luck!” I receive from my teammates doesn’t help, but I strive to stay optimistic, and enjoy the last few moments of physical relaxation.

Once the race officials scan the starting line, one of them yells, “Runners, to your marks! ... Set ...” BAM! The gunshot booms throughout the sky, and the hundreds of runners surge forward the way a rip current rushes out to sea. We start out spread over a starting line a hundred feet wide, and are soon funneled into a small pathway only twenty feet wide, and I get shoved in every direction by aggressive competitors. Within moments, I am left far behind our front-runners, indecisive about how to pace myself. As we pass the stadium where Coach and many of the spectators are situated, my high adrenaline and fear set in, causing a drowning panic. As Coach points at a runner passing me and yells to me to “Run as a team! Keep up with him! Run!” I race forwards to match strides with him.

At that moment, I secure my death wish. I have no reasonable excuse- no injury or problem with my running. If not, then my sister would jeer at me for not beating her race times, and Coach would think badly of me. So I race. I pick up my legs and run despite the terrible pain and fatigue building up.

Now I attempt to distract myself from running a little bit. One of our senior runners had told me that once I recognized that “Running was pain,” and when I could distract myself from the pain, running would become much easier. I try to think about programming- of logical code that makes sense and doesn’t require any physical effort- however, I trip on a rock and my mind floats back to running.

I then reminisce about bowling, another one of my hobbies, though I remember the frustration I experience so often when bowling, which disturbs my worried soul even more.

Then, I turn to school, which comforts me as I recall this year’s successes and remarkable improvements from middle school. I think of the support of my friends, my teachers, and my family. It takes my mind off running, my body subconsciously taking over. Oh, what a different

experience running is now! I hardly notice the increasing exhaustion that was so painful earlier in the race.

By now, I've reached past the third kilometer mark, so I have less than halfway to go. Feeling pretty good about myself, I attempt to speed up, and the pain increases exponentially. Nevertheless, I bump up my speed, and manage to rush past a runner for the first time. I don't slow down as I tire, whereas I instead speed up, and I pass a second runner, a third, a fourth. I start to notice others slowing down, and I use this to my advantage and continue gaining places. They're sweaty and muddy and unwilling to run any more, just as I am. Now I realise that I'm not the only one who feels this terrible; that others can empathize with me. By the looks on their faces, they're using even more effort to push themselves than I am; I realise now that I have a greater potential, so I order my legs to push their limit..

The weariness of my legs and my shortness of breath are indescribable, yet somehow I make my way to the last kilometer at a fast run. My legs are becoming so tired that I start to trip over my own feet and barely catch myself from falling, and I look ahead to see the last kilometer of the race to be on a steep hill, and my heart drops. The dull pains in my legs return. I fall behind a few runners, dreading the next few minutes. I can't do this! I almost stop, but I think back to cross country practice.

I tell myself, *We've run faster and longer than this before. You've run harder than this. This is easy, and you can do this.* I remember the pain of practice and reassure myself that I'm not going to die. I barely manage to prevent myself from walking or completely stopping.

There's only half a kilometer left in the race. Mind tricks are all I have to keep myself from giving up. *It's only half a kilometer left to go. Only one and a half laps around a field.* Along with Coach's yelling on the sideline, I encourage my body to move faster, until I'm achieving a full-out sprint.

There's a hundred meters left. I urge my body to go faster, and it almost cries back to me, "Jon, you're going to die! You can't do this anymore!" The urge to stop is so great, I almost cry on the finishing stretch. In no time, there's only fifty meters left; twenty-five meters; ten meters, and I finish!

I can't believe it! I survived the race, and I've beat my sister's times. I can't wait to boast my scores at home. Coach and the fastest of my fellow teammates congratulate me for a great first race as a freshman, and I've made varsity as a top runner in the race. I'm astounded and so tired so that it takes a great effort for me to return to our tent and gulp down some water, relax, and think about my race.

I never want to race again, although I know I'll have many more like this over the next few years in high school. I know running has felt like a death wish I put upon myself, though I also know that the way I am running will not kill me, and the harder I run, the better I'll do, and the more satisfied I'll be about myself. Although it's painful, effort is nevertheless worth it- the more diligent you are, the better the reward. As Dad always says, "No pain, no gain."

I realise that my life from a toddler to a young adult will be that last uphill kilometer, full of pain and struggle and tests of moral character disguised as self-imposed death wishes- but, one day, if I have the strength to persevere, there's hope that I'll be able to fly through that finish line at the top of the hill.

It's time I ought to try harder.